

札幌大学総合論叢 第46号 (2018年10月)

〈資料紹介〉

Active Dictation for Improving Student Engagement and Checking Information

Michael Mielke

Key words: Noticing, Student engagement, Dictation, Comprehension skills

I Introduction

In teaching English conversation and writing to Japanese college students there seem to be many common errors that continue to appear again and again (Izzo, 1999). Despite explicit teaching and testing, the errors continue. Partly it seems that the students are just not noticing what is actually wrong. This could be put down to anything from lack of English knowledge to bad eyesight (students not wearing eye-glasses in class), sleepiness, or maybe just a lack of caring. It may also be due to shyness in asking for help or not knowing how to ask for help. To address this problem, I explored using dictations as a way to improve the students' noticing of grammar and vocabulary in their written and spoken English.

Dictations have a long history in language teaching and it is easy to see why: they are simple to implement with minimum equipment and preparation on the part of the teacher. As well, they are fairly simple to adapt to any size group and multiple levels in the same classroom (Davis and Rinvulcri, 1988). In addition, many studies have demonstrated that doing regular dictation practice has shown efficacy in improving listening comprehension (Yonezaki, 2014; Davis and Rinvulcri, 1988; Takeuchi, 1997), predicting the correct grammar form, reinforcing structure and vocabulary (Morris, 1983), improving the spelling of vocabulary words and phrases (Rahimi, 2008), and improving the short term memory of language learners in retaining the language they are hearing by their trying to reproduce what they had heard by writing (Morris, 1983; Nation, 1991).

In a typical dictation, the teacher reads out or plays recorded speech on some electronic medium. Often, students are supposed to just listen the first time to get the overall gist, then listen

twice more and try to reproduce on paper what they had heard. Variations of this include giving some clue words to help or having gaps in a prepared text that the students fill in. Another popular format called “dictogloss” has students listen for key words, write them down, then try to reproduce the text meaning in small group discussions. (Wajnryb, 1990)

However, the dictation results were not very good. The students seemed to be overwhelmed, especially beginner students. For one thing, the students lacked enough knowledge and experience of English vocabulary pronunciation and spelling norms. They also lacked enough knowledge of English grammar to correctly fill in the inevitable gaps that occur due to how English speakers stress important words in a sentence but not others. This makes it very difficult to hear the unstressed words in normal, fluent speech, let alone reproduce them. The large amount of mistakes made it difficult for the students to notice and learn from it. There was just too much to take in.

Another problem was feedback for the students. In many cases, the student dictations were checked too long after they had been completed by the students by looking at the complete text on a screen or blackboard, by other students, or by the teacher, but given back at a later time. In these cases, the students may miss some of the errors due to lack of noticing or the feedback takes place too long after the fact to have an impact. Immediate, accurate, feedback is more conducive to learning. (Ip, 2005)

To address these new issues, and to still get the benefits of dictations as a regular part of the classroom routine, I started teaching the students to use a variety of classroom English checking phrases in order to solve the “puzzle” of the dictation; to become more active and responsible in the dictation process. Students are graded each time, and to pass the students must have 100% accuracy. This makes accuracy the focus of the dictation, rather than just getting the basic meaning. As the term progresses, the amount of time given to the students to complete the dictation task is lessened. This activity is easy to implement and has many benefits including more student engagement, (Svalberg, 2012), noticing of spelling and grammar forms, review, exposure to new target language, getting instant feedback which can be acted on, and overcoming fossilized errors (Valette, 1964). Each of these areas, I would like to quantify and qualify with more data in future reports. For now, this paper will focus on the actual implementation of this style of dictation and how to use it for different learning outcomes.

II Active Dictation

Traditionally, dictation is a one-way street where the teacher reads out a passage and

students write it down. This poses so many challenges for Japanese students. New vocabulary, even if the students are able to hear the pronunciation clearly, is very difficult for students to spell with accuracy -- especially if it is the first time they have encountered a word. Proper nouns, certain letters, articles, and numbers can be especially difficult. (Izzo, 1999) To help them achieve the goal of 100% accuracy, the students must ask questions or request the teacher to repeat the dictation. Some students have knowledge of one or two helpful checking phrases for real life interactions that they exclusively make use of. Two very common phrases are, "Once more, please.", or "Speak more slowly, please." Both of these, while useful in some contexts, do nothing to help with spelling or actually knowing if what they are writing is correct. However, even after hearing the dictation many times students will still have problems with writing the correct spelling. Also, there will be many missing words because students cannot easily hear the unstressed words in English speech, and lack the knowledge of grammar or idiomatic expressions to fill in those spaces.

Students need to be able to break up the dictation and focus on the areas that they are having trouble hearing. Furthermore, they need to be trained to ask how to spell words if they are not sure of the correct spelling. This can be very important for understanding. English pronunciation is difficult and students may actually recognize the word when they see it written. If they don't know the word, at least now they have the ability to look up the word in a dictionary to check the meaning because they have the correct spelling. Finally, they need quick feedback on their production to know if they are on the right track.

The phrases I have found to be the most efficient and effective for basic active dictations are:

Excuse me,

Could you say the **1st / 2nd / 3rd / 4th** part again, please?

What did you say (just) **before / after** <known word>?

What did you say **between** <known word> and <known word>?

How do you spell <known word>? How do you spell that?

 as in <BABY>? / <Fourteen, one-four>?

What does <new word> mean?

Is this right?

Could you check this, please?

III Procedure

The instructor prepares the checking phrases beforehand. They are either written on the blackboard or whiteboard (in the future, students can take turns writing them on the board each class), or using a projector and presentation software so that the students can refer to them easily during the dictation. Students should write the phrases in their books to review outside of class, but they need to be looking at the teacher when they are asking their checking phrases.

Students must have a notebook in which to write down their dictations. This can serve to show each student's weak points, strong points, and improvements over the course of the term. It will also help the teacher to see what the class, in general, is having trouble with hearing or with their knowledge of grammar and spelling.

The teacher asks the students to take out their notebooks. The instructor then reads out at least 3 sentences, sometimes more, depending on the complexity of each sentence, and the level of the students in that class. The instructor should always speak at a normal, fluent, speed. The students will catch very little of what was spoken the first time. In the beginning, some students will say, "Could you say all of it again?" even though it is not one of the options. The first time I tried this style of dictation, I told them to use the phrases I had written on the board, but later decided to let them discover how inefficient the phrase, "Could you say all of it again?", was. I would read out the whole dictation again at the same speed. It becomes obvious very quickly that this approach is ineffective for the students. The students tend to catch the first 2 words and the last 2 words. I gesture to the phrases "1st part, 2nd part", etc. until somebody asks a question with a narrower scope. The key to quickly mastering these dictations is to break up the sentences into manageable chunks. When students start repeating the same question many times, the instructor should stop them and gesture to "What did you say (just) **before** / **after** <known word>?", followed by, "How do you spell that?". Students don't need to be concerned about meaning at this point - accuracy is the goal. When students are confident that they are finished, they ask the teacher to check their work. This part is crucial to giving the students the quick feedback that they need to notice their mistakes and act on them. The instructor should circle every mistake including areas where words are missing. This gives the students immediate feedback and helps the students focus and after thinking about their mistakes, either make the appropriate corrections or quickly ask the best question to help them finish the task. After a set time period has expired (usually about 15 minutes) the instructor reveals the sentences, highlights the common errors, and gives brief explanations of why the mistakes are being made. The students should correct their sentences in their notebooks.

IV Factors to Consider when Preparing Active Dictations

These dictations are done at the beginning of every class. Every dictation should have specific goals. It is a good idea to keep the following suggestions in mind:

- 1) Make sentences that will introduce a new language target or vocabulary.
- 2) Make sentences that will review a previous lesson's vocabulary or grammar target.
Students need a large amount of exposure to grammar forms and vocabulary in order to remember them.(Nation, 2013) The more exposure they have, the better.
- 3) Make sentences that highlight common grammatical errors. This can be especially useful for students who have problems with subject and verb agreement, correct use of conjunctions, and capitalization. Active dictation at the beginning of a writing class has been very effective in reviewing these common errors with students and helping them to notice features of English grammar that they had forgotten or didn't realize were there. While I do not have concrete data of these improvements to cite for this paper, I have observed it, and hope to provide supporting data in future reports.
- 4) Make sentences and words that highlight easily confused sounds whenever possible. Not only numbers such as 13/30, 14/40,15/50, etc., but also less obvious ones such as 12/20, and 7/9. Letters that are easily confused when spelling words include b/v, m/n, g/z, p/t/b, and a/r. These letter combinations are particularly difficult for students to distinguish, and thus a new strategy needs to be learned. In the case of "b" and "v", the phrase such as "b"as in "baby" or "v" as in "vacation" with rising intonation is very useful. For confusing number combinations such as 14 and 40, the phrase 'fourteen, one-four' is very efficient and clearly understood.

V Factors to Consider when Doing Active Dictations

- 1) Students have a notebook and use a pen when they are doing these dictations. They should rewrite the sentences that have errors. This allows the students to review their mistakes easily, and it will also be a good collection of common student errors for the instructor to use as data. The chore of having to rewrite the whole sentence makes the students pay more attention to their writing.
- 2) Be sure to only indicate errors while you are checking their work. Do not give the answer unless the student specifically asks or they are really struggling. Students need to listen and make adjustments to their writing based on what they are hearing and their

own understanding of what the correct language is. After they have made the same error throughout a number of dictations, they will start to “notice” and remember. For example, a common error among many Japanese learners of English is third person subject-verb agreement. (Izzo, 1990) Students often forget the “s” on the end of the verb. While they may not be able to hear the “s” sound, they will know that it should be there from their knowledge of grammar. The same could also be said for articles such as “a” and “the”.

- 3) Move quickly around the room. Be sure to give equal attention to everyone. Encourage quiet students to speak up.
- 4) Do not allow students to use dictionaries - this is primarily speaking and listening practice. Accurate writing is the finished product, but they need to speak to get the information they need. They can check specific words for meaning after the dictation time has expired and the dictations have been checked.
- 5) After students have become proficient at completing the dictations, you can stop showing the checking phrases. You could also show the time remaining to complete the activity and make the time progressively shorter.
- 6) Surprise the students with rewards such as candies periodically if they ask the first question or successfully complete the dictation within the time limit. Keep the atmosphere fun and exciting, like a game.
- 7) To avoid the better students from monopolizing the speaking and to encourage speaking from lower level students, teams can be employed. The quieter speakers on the team are made to ask the questions or there is a limited number of questions each person can ask.
- 8) Teach students to control the speed of the information they have requested by shadowing the words or letters as the teacher speaks them.

VI Alternative Forms of Active Dictation

The above discussion has so far focussed on a standard form of accurately reproducing, on paper, speech from a native speaker of English. Understanding the meaning is not really the goal as much as getting the information communicated to them from a speaker written 100% correctly, although understanding what is being said can be very helpful in predicting what the words might be. To combat a feeling of repetitiveness and boredom, it has been useful to change the format from time to time. One way is to have the students write down the correct information and then do something with the information. For example, you can have the students first write down the

phrases then draw a picture of what was described by the teacher. This creates a need for the phrase “What does <new word> mean?”. Another activity might be for the teacher to provide directions to some destination. Upon successful completion of the dictation, the teacher provides a map and the students mark the route on the map. For an excellent resource in alternative types of dictations, please refer to Davis and Rinvolducr’s book, *Dictation: New Methods, New Possibilities*, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

VII Conclusion

Active dictations are easy to prepare and implement with a minimum of resources. Done at the beginning of the class, they act as a nice warm up to get the students engaged. For students that are successful, they often show a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction, which seems to make the students more motivated. Students who don’t quite make it but try hard seem to enjoy the process and tend to remember the language point that was preventing them from getting it perfect. The checking phrases give the students more confidence in asking the teacher checking questions in other parts of the lesson. The active dictations also allow the teacher to provide far more listening practice in each class, especially writing classes, than the students would otherwise get. According to Vandergrift, this listening practice in a more relaxed, even fun environment really helps students develop useful listening strategies (Vandergrift, 1999).

Using active dictations regularly in class has helped make students more aware of spelling, grammar, plural forms, and articles. It has been especially useful for teaching and reviewing the rules of capitalization in English. For oral English classes, the main benefit has been the checking phrases and having the students become very proficient in their use to the point where the phrases become second nature. They allow the students to control the flow of information and focus more efficiently on the parts of sentences that they have trouble hearing or comprehending, even in non-dictation interactions. Because the phrases are at a suitable level of politeness for most interactions, students who work in the service industry can use the same phrases to confidently and, more importantly, accurately record foreign names, numbers, dates, and times. Students who go abroad will also be able to use them for confirming reservations, flight times, and contact people’s names, email addresses and phone numbers. From the teacher’s point of view, these active dictations allow the teacher to really focus on what the students need to learn or review. They also allow the students to receive instant feedback on their strong points and weak points when it comes to their knowledge of English and their listening comprehension.

References

- Cohen, Joshua (2015) "The effectiveness of using dictation to develop listening comprehension." Kinki University Center for Liberal Arts and Foreign Language Education Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 43-56.
- Davis, Paul, and Mario Rinvulcri (1988). Dictation: New Methods, New Possibilities. Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Fotos, S. S. "Consciousness Raising and Noticing through Focus on Form: Grammar Task Performance versus Formal Instruction." Applied Linguistics, vol. 14, no. 4, Jan. 1993, pp. 385-407.
- Ip, Y.K. "The importance of giving feedback to students". Ideas on Teaching, Volume 4, December, 2005.
- Izzo, John. "English Writing Errors of Japanese Students as Reported by University Professors". Center for Language Research 1999 Annual Review. Aizuwakamatsu, Japan: University of Aizu.
- Kidd, Richard. "Teaching ESL Grammar through Dictation." TESL Canada Journal, Vol. 10, No.1, 1992, p. 49.
- Morris, S. "Dictation - a technique in need of reappraisal." ELT Journal, Vol. 37, 1983, pp.121-126.
- Nation, Paul. "Dictation, Dicto-comp, and Related Techniques". English Teaching Forum, October, 1991.
- Nation, Paul. What should every EFL teacher know? Compass Publishing, 2013.
- Rahimi, M. (2008). Using dictation to improve language proficiency. The Asian EFL Journal, Vol.10, No.1, pp.33-47.
- Svalberg, A. M-L. (2009). Engagement with Language: Developing a Construct. Language Awareness, Vol. 18.3-4, pp.242-258.
- Takeuchi, O. (1997). Dictation: Is it really effective for language teaching? Kansai University Audio Visual Education, Vol.20, pp.155-161.
- Vallete, R.M.(1964). The use of the dictee in the French language classroom. Modern Language Journal, Vol. 48, pp.431-434.
- Vandergrift, L. "Facilitating second language listening comprehension: acquiring successful strategies." EFL Journal, Vol.53, No.3, 1999, pp.168-176.
- Wajnryb, Ruth. Grammar Dictation. Oxford Univ. Press, 2010.
- Yonezaki, Hirokazu. "Effectiveness of Dictation in Improving English Listening Ability of Japanese

High School Students.”Research Reports of Nagaoka National College of Technology,
Vol.50, 2014.